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From: Braum Barber, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE)

Re: Environmental Issues, Lethbridge and Region

Since 1984, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE) has advocated for a healthy and environmentally sustainable community. SAGE has actively participated in municipal and regional planning, and has advocated for the protection and restoration of headwaters, the maintenance of instream flows required for aquatic health and biodiversity, and the preservation of native grasslands. The organization has also informed the public on home energy performance, waste management, and emerging issues like microplastics in the environment.

There are a few issues that are important for the future of Lethbridge and region that can be affected through provincial policy and legislation:

1. **Prioritize the protection of headwaters from pollution.** The two main challenges are: 1) proposed coal mining which will contribute to selenium levels that may exceed allowable levels for drinking water (as currently being experienced in Fernie and Sparwood), and 2) linear disturbances from forestry, industrial and recreational activities leading to accelerated soil erosion into river and streams that negatively impacting habitat for species-at-risk (indicators of a healthy aquatic environment). Healthy rivers represent an irreplaceable source for social and economic flourishing in the region.
2. **Prioritize the maintenance of evidence-based Instream Flow Needs (IFNs) in water management.** The current system of allocating water from our rivers must acknowledge flows that sustains aquatic and riparian health. Schemes for the expansion of on- and off-stream storage in southern Alberta ignore the observed and anticipated decline in precipitation and snow-pack due to climate change. Furthermore, expanding irrigation acres without adequate water supply represents lost economic opportunities (stranded investment) and threatens the loss of valuable native grasslands that support biodiversity and species-at-risk, carbon sequestration, and drought resistance in the region. Water management modelling must be assessed for source flows from headwater tributaries and the impacts of climate change, and native grasslands must be preserved.

3. **Municipal governance should allow for independent decision-making to manage urban sprawl and encourage higher energy performance in the built environment.** Urban sprawl has a large impact on the operation costs for municipalities, increases greenhouse gas emissions, and represents a significant loss of peri-urban agricultural land – considerably more than renewable energy projects which have garnered more attention. The life-cycle of buildings constructed today will be in the order of 60 to 80 years – that is 2080 to the end of the century. Global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2050 suggests that new building must meet higher energy performance standards. They are currently at the lowest tier with no path articulated for improvement. The building energy standards program in British Columbia is an informative example of a plan for improving energy-performance.
4. **Create an airshed for Lethbridge & region** that will measure, monitor, evaluate and respond to high levels of air pollution including NO_x, SO_x, ground-level ozone, ammonia, methane and particulate matter.
5. **Continue to promote and expand the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) program** to improve the management of recyclable materials, and place more emphasis on ‘responsibility’ which encourages manufacturers to better design-for-disassembly and chose materials that are more recyclable or biodegradable. The reduction of single-use plastics represents an opportunity to conserve non-renewable resources and increase the useful life of landfills, but also reduce microplastics in the environment, which represents an emerging (and alarming) type of pollution impacting human and ecological health.
6. **Encourage planning for food security.** The environmental changes farmers see now - and will continue to see in the future – will not only increase the risk to the economic stability of farming families and local communities, but will likely create food supply-chain issues on a local and global scale. The challenges include water availability, heat stress, pest and disease vectors, and extreme wind and rain events. These stressors will affect plant and soil health and may reduce productivity, profitability and competitiveness of Alberta farmers. Further, these challenges will affect the availability and affordability of food for all Albertans. Formalized peri-urban agriculture and food planning and distribution would provide some food security for Lethbridge and region.
7. **Support action plans that lead to improved resilience:** infrastructure, climate emergency measures, incentives for water-conservation practices, and rebates for upgrades that reduce energy consumption. An urban forest strategy that encourages the planting of more trees will support biodiversity, reduce heat-island effects, and help absorb carbon from the atmosphere to mitigate the impacts of climate change. While our environment is vulnerable to changes in climate, good planning and design can help provide protection from extreme climate and weather events.

SAGE encourages our provincial decision-makers to direct policy and legislation towards the preservation of a healthy environment. Sustainable social and economic benefits are derived from ecological integrity – that is, clean water, clean air, healthy soil, reduced greenhouse gas emissions and robust biodiversity.